



Meet The Team: Justin DeSantis

The first visit to a national park Justin DeSantis can remember is a trip to the Statue of Liberty when he was eight or nine. “It was dark, dank, and leaking inside the statue, and the torch was closed,” recalled Justin. “Maybe that was a glimpse of my future work with the park service: ‘it’s in bad shape and part of it’s closed...’”

Today Justin is the Regional Transportation Manager for the National Park Service Pacific West Region, where he exercises his skills as a landscape architect. He has been with the National Park Service for 15 years, all of that time based in the San Francisco area.

Justin grew up in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and thought he might like to be a rocket scientist when he was in high school. “I somehow lost track of that, but I did have a high school teacher who was very excited about attention to detail,” said Justin. “At the time, I remember thinking, ‘what’s the big deal here?’ But it eventually sunk in and has really helped me in my work.”

Justin DeSantis is the Regional Transportation Manager for the National Park Service Pacific West Region.



University studies led him to a three-year graduate program in landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. “We shared that program with the landscape construction program, and the initial year we had some overlap in classes,” Justin recalled. “In the long run, I think the landscape construction courses I took were useful...the mixture was a good preparation for my work with the National Park Service.”

Following graduation, Justin worked for five years at two Massachusetts firms doing landscape architectural design. “I knew that I wanted to work in San Francisco because we had some friends here, so my wife and I quit our jobs, sold off our furniture, moved to San Francisco and scrambled for jobs.”

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After arriving at the NPS regional office in Oakland, Justin initially worked with Ray Murray in the planning division, assisting in several new area studies that had recently received authorization from Congress: the Gaviota Coast in Santa Barbara County, and Fort Hunter Liggett, a military installation in Monterey County. “I started preparing environmental documents for the two study areas, working with the public meetings, and mapping out potential alternatives,” said Justin. “It was interesting work, but subsequently neither of the study areas came into the park service.”



Justin moved on to work with Dave Kruse and the regional Park Roads and Parkways Program (PRPP) as a project manager. In 2006, he moved into the PRPP regional coordinator position. One of the first projects he was involved in was the Marin Headlands at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA).

“This was a really satisfying project,” Justin said. “The Marin Headlands are the southern end of the ridge that juts out into San Francisco Bay from the north. It had been an army base before it became a national park unit. The roads were in pretty bad shape, just falling apart, poor drainage, eroding hillsides, no shoulders, too wide in some places, too narrow in others.”

“The planning process for this park had begun just before I started working in the roads program,” Justin said. “About a year after I came on, Dave Kruse and I started working on the overall planning process for the Headlands.”

Today, Justin reports, nearly every improvement called for in that planning document has been implemented. “Plus, it’s nearby, so I can get out there and look at it. I bike ride out there a lot on weekends.” (See the related Project Profile, The Marin Headlands, on this web site.)

More recently, Justin has been working with some high-profile projects in Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove. “We’re coordinating a lot of work with the park recreation fee program at Yosemite and also with the Yosemite Conservancy at the Mariposa Grove for improvements to the visitor experience and for resource protection,” said Justin.

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“We’re basically pulling the upper part of the road system out of the Grove, and building a new parking lot and shuttle transfer station at the Wawona entrance. It’s been a really complicated project with a lot of different players, and a lot of different fund sources.”

Justin said that the stress level has been a little higher on the Mariposa Grove project, because the park has had to close the unit to visitation while the work is underway. “It’s a multi-phase project, and we’re striving to get it re-opened for the 2017 season,” he said. “It’s going to be a big challenge.”

Still, Justin enjoys the challenges he’s found with the National Park Service. “The fun parts are when we’re outside, either with a team of designers, or a construction crew, trying to figure out a site problem. Those moments when I’m on site, with a group of experienced and talented people, are the most rewarding,” said Justin. “I feel that those are the situations where people learn from each other, and also make the best decisions, when you’re actually there on site.”

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Justin said he has had multiple “best moments” in national parks. “When I’m arriving to a field review, where we’re going to be going over a project, often that moment of just driving into a park is incredible,” he said. “A place like Yosemite Valley, where you’re entering this huge valley of rock...it’s really a great experience. And then we get to work, looking at culverts and intersection alignments and whether or not we have stopping sight distances. At that point you’re not really appreciating the landscape any longer, because you need to focus on the work.”

Justin said that he’d received a lot of advice and guidance during his NPS career. “For the year and a half that I worked for him, Ray Murray taught me a lot about the National Park Service because I knew nothing coming into it,” said Justin. “And Jack Williams, the now-retired facility manager for our region, educated me about attitude, and the importance of providing good customer service to the parks.”

Justin added that Dave Kruse also stressed customer service, “but also how to be effective with my time and effort, and not to agonize over minutiae...how getting something

to 95 percent accurate was okay, if that last 5 percent of perfection was going to take as long as the first 95 percent.”

When he’s not working on park projects, Justin said he enjoys bicycling and skiing. “I’m still crazy about skiing, despite the warm winters we’ve had in the past few years,” he said. “I’ll do any kind of skiing: downhill, cross-country, back-country, whatever. If someone wanted to give me a couple of heli-skiing gift certificates, that would be great, too.”

With luck, the current El Nino weather pattern will provide Justin with some additional snow this year. In the meantime, you’ll find him in one of the western parks, planning a fix for a transportation facility in need of an update or repair.

